

Land girl



Seize the day

Unless policy-makers wake up to the worth of land value taxation, author and columnist **Antonia Swinson** fears for her children's chances of bringing up their families in the UK

IT IS A symptom of becoming a land tax groupie, that one gains a completely new perspective on the news. To me it is now so obvious the current brouhaha about PFI, the UK's lousy work/life balance, crumbling infrastructure, the pensions timebomb and ongoing social disintegration, are the result of being ground down between the twin millstones of a feudal land ownership structure and a post-1980s American-style market economy – a process land value taxation could reverse with extraordinary speed.

Why don't UK policy makers 'get it'? I am increasingly confident they soon will. For as the consensus grows for greater social justice and a lighter tax burden, the penny will drop. With a reconstructed House of Lords, those great people's weapons, the internet and email, a burning popular thirst for history and a post 9/11 re-evaluation of community, frankly, we have never had a better time to sell land value taxation. Carpe diem!

My own damascene conversion to the debate occurred three years ago, when living in a small East Lothian coastal town. I saw city folk sleeping overnight in their BMWs, queuing up to buy six figure executive housing being spat up on a town centre beauty spot, just sold by the laird. Timing is all, so the laird, developers (and the council) all cleaned up, while the local community, whose efforts had imbued the site with its value, received nothing. In fact worse than nothing. While the laird was able to send his grandchildren to Ampleforth, class sizes in the local primary school shot up to 36, against Government guidelines. Racism against the incoming English worsened and our small high street choked with stressed, mega-mortgaged professionals fighting for parking. I wrote about this in *Scotland on Sunday*, was secretly hailed as a hero and duly cut by the laird's wife.

Perhaps had I not moved to the country, I would never have realised what power landowners exert on the state, and land value taxation would have remained a mystery. For while the number and value of acres owned by urban landowners remains largely unchallenged and unlegislated against, country landowners are more visible and I have seen at first hand how beautifully they bamboozle the urban national press into believing they are stewards of the nation's heritage.

How little comment there was about the creepy, sinister nature of the recent Countryside March. Organisers could not put together a coherent platform of speakers, yet, in a parody of olde worlde rotten borough politics, they doled out free tube tickets to crowds who did not connect that these paymasters were the reason for rural housing poverty in the first place.

It is time to make these connections, not least to the young people, who have most to gain from land value taxation, and are the principal victims of the twin evils of the tax system and land

ownership patterns. With some justice, Fred Harrison of the Centre for Land Policy Studies (CLPS) argues that land reform and land value taxation are too often intertwined, that it doesn't matter how many acres landowners possess as long as they pay their full value to the community. In theory, he's right. Yet this does not acknowledge the spiritual scarring. That is detailed by Alastair McIntosh in *Soil and Soul*, where he shows – drawing on Andy Wightman's work in *Who Owns Scotland* – how 1,252 landowners owning 66 per cent of the privately-owned land in rural Scotland results in an ongoing mental crippling of young people.

Last year, it was revealed that the young male suicide rate in Scotland is now double that of England and Wales. Intuitively, who can deny this is an effect of such historic emasculation? This is at the extreme. But for years I have talked to business groups across Scotland and their main concern never varies – where is our young people's entrepreneurial spirit? Where are the start-ups, the so-called 'gazelles' that create employment? It is a given that entrepreneurship, not to mention a healthy birth rate, are two effects of easy access to land. So much so, I even succeeded in making the chairman of the Scottish Landowners' Federation admit that Scotland's land-owning pattern probably has a bearing on its lamentable lack of business chutzpah – even though Scots have blazed a trail world-wide for centuries.

So *pace*, Fred, land value taxation should at least be thrown onto Scotland's land reform fire, at present under severe threat by the landowners' lobbyists. It frightens the socks off them, for they know the middle classes might finally wake up. CLPS chair Ron Banks estimates that a move to land value taxation in Scotland would deliver £18.97 billion – not much less than Scotland's Block Grant, and without the 'deadweight loss' of foregone economic activity of the current tax system, which he estimates at a whopping £48.5 billion!

Yet young people suffer across the UK. Banks estimates the deadweight loss created by the present tax system as £881 billion. This is nearly equivalent to the value of the whole UK economy and which interestingly mirrors the current UK personal debt mountain borne by mule citizens buckling under mortgages, largely created by the land-value monopoly. So should we be surprised by the latest Census revelation that 600,000 young men have moved abroad? Can you blame them when all they can expect here is a lifetime of debt and high taxes, with 99.9 per cent of the population squashed onto less than 9 per cent of the UK land mass, according to *Who Owns Britain* author Kevin Cahill? No. Young men need room to breathe.

Unless land value taxation is introduced there will continue to be painful loss to our nation. I live with the knowledge that unless these arguments prevail, the chances of my own two children bringing up their own families on this island, let alone anywhere near my sought after postcode, are close to zero.

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